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AUTHOR Lain, Laurence B.
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether newspaper mug shots are perceived by readers as being positive or negative in tone and whether the mug shots that are selected match the roles of their subjects in accompanying stories. Twenty-three news and feature stories with associated mug shots were clipped from seven daily newspapers. Pictures and stories were then separated, and the pictures were distributed to 51 undergraduate students who were asked to indicate whether each photo gave them a positive, negative, or neutral impression of the subject. The stories that had originally accompanied the pictures were distributed to a different group of 66 undergraduates who were also asked to state their impressions of the subjects in stories. Analysis of the results indicated that readers agree significantly on their impressions of subjects in the stories, as did the group who viewed only the mugshots. The fact that the impressions of the subjects were similar whether the story was read or the mugshot alone was viewed indicates that editors may have based their selection of accompanying photos on their subjective impressions of the stories. In the interest of remaining fair and impartial, editors should exercise caution in their selection of mug shots. (Tables of findings are included). (DF)

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READER PERCEPTION OF NEWSPAPER MUG SHOT SUBJECTS IN PHOTOS AND IN STORIES

by
Laurence B. Lain
Department of Communication
University of Dayton
Dayton, Ohio 45469

(513) 229-2742

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ABSTRACT

Readers of approximately two dozen news stories agreed significantly on their impressions of the subjects of those stories, as did another group of readers who viewed only the mugshot photographs which had run with the stories. Readers do not appear to see mugshots as necessarily neutral, but make judgments about the people so pictured.

These judgments correlated significantly with the judgments other readers made about the same subjects based on the stories which had run with the photos. This suggests that editors may have based their selection of accompanying photos on their subjective impressions of the subjects of the stories.

Numerous photographs are usually available of the subjects of news stories, particularly local stories. Results suggest that editors must exercise caution in choosing mugshots if they are not to stumble in the pursuit of fairness.

READER PERCEPTION OF NEWSPAPER MUG SHOT SUBJECTS

IN PHOTOS AND IN STORIES

Mug shots are the neglected step-children of the newspaper photo department. Maligned and abused, they are repeatedly told they are unimportant and will never amount to anything. They reside in awkward spaces and are assigned roles that editors see as trivial. But they persist, even flourish. Newspapers never seem to be able to get along without them.

However, there has been little attempt to date to study the extent to which the mug shot deserves its reputation as being little more than a space filler.[1] In a study of forty years of newspaper photographs, Singletary found that nearly 40 per cent of the photos available were mugs, but did not include them in most of his analyses because "mugshots were considered to be relatively contentless and uninformative."[2] The same study noted the decline in mugshot use from 59.4 per cent of all pictures in 1936 to 29.9 per cent in 1976.

Most studies of newspaper photographs have centered on larger, display photos, those that show action or groups of people. But many mug shots are cropped out of these larger photos, and may also show action or emotion. Results of some earlier studies of larger photos may therefore be applicable to mug shots as well.

Van Tubergen and Mahsman[3] found that reader perception of the attributes of photo subjects is influenced by whether the picture is flattering or not. Adams, et al.[4] confirmed that the cropping of photos is significant, with people preferring more tightly cropped photographs of men than of women, i.e. that readers focus on the faces of men and on the bodies

of women. Singletary and Lamb[5] found that few of the 111 news photographs studied in a magazine for press photographers were strictly neutral in perspective; the overwhelming majority were judged to be negative in emotional tone. Photographers were clearly able to transmit positive and negative impressions, deliberately or otherwise, through display photos. It is an accepted fact that the dramatic is normally preferred to the routine in photographs of all sorts. Bethune[6] found a strong bias among Pulitzer jury members for spectacular content as compared with technical polish.

Sociologist Erving Goffman distinguished carefully between the actual image that is a photograph and the interpretation or subjective appraisals possible in its viewers. Even photographs taken for informational purposes, like news, are subject to the analysis, conscious or not, of those who view them.[7] Curry and Clarke spelled out the same point plainly: "Many do not realize that a photograph represents an intricate set of relationships involving the photographer's particular view of reality, the subject's own assumptions of the situation, the viewer's own beliefs and values, as well as the context in which the picture is viewed."[8]

Editors should be aware of the emotional impact of the display photographs they chose to run; they may, in fact, often select certain photographs for the implied messages they carry. This being the case, we can hypothesize that 1) not only display photos but also mug shots will be perceived by readers as being frequently positive or negative in tone, and that 2) mug shots will be selected which match the roles of their subjects in accompanying stories, i.e. that mug shots of people who are portrayed positively in a story will themselves be viewed positively by readers, and

also be interpreted negatively by readers.

METHOD

All stories which contained associated mug shots were clipped from seven daily newspapaers of October 3, 1985.[9] Only news and feature stories were used; obituaries and personal opinion columns with photos were not included in the study. Stories also were eliminated which pictured well-known public figures who many people might recognize and about whom they might already hold strong feelings. This left a pool of 23 stories.

In an effort to prevent stories and pictures from "contaminating" each other, pictures were separated from stories, and each was pasted on a separate sheet of plain white paper. Stories and pictures were numbered separately, in random order.

Pictures were then distributed to 51 undergraduate students who were asked to indicate whether each photograph gave them a favorable impression of the subject, an unfavorable impression, or a neutral impression. The stories which had originally accompanied the pictures were distributed to a separate group of 66 undergraduates, who were asked to respond in similar manner, i.e. whether they received a favorable, unfavorable, or neutral impression of the subject of each story. Readers were told not to look for deliberate slanting, since little if any of that was expected in these news stories but that if they thought they detected such bias, they could react to it however they wished.

Stories and pictures were administered to separate groups to prevent the possibility of subjects associating specific pictures with their stories

and allowing their impressions of the story to be influenced by their reaction to the art or vice versa.

RESULTS

Each story and each picture was given a score of +1 for each favorable impression reported by a respondent, and a score of -1 for each negative impression reported. A neutral impression was scored as 0. The resulting total was divided by the number of subjects responding to each item (This number varied slightly for each item since some subjects did not respond to all items.) producing a score for each item whose range was from +1 to -1. Table 1 reports the scores for the 23 stories, and Table 2 reports scores for the 23 pictures.

For the most part, readers had clear opinions fostered by the stories and pictures. Eight of the 23 stories were scored as providing a generally positive impression (scores of >+0.33), and six of the stories as giving a generally negative impression (scores <-0.33). The remaining nine stories fell into the neutral impression zone of +0.33 to -0.33. Seven of the photographs were found generally positive by readers, and five were scored as generally negative.

There was clear and consistant agreement among readers about the impression left by each story and photo. Only one of the 23 stories and four of the 23 photos produced Chi Square scores which did not indicate significant agreement among subjects. The first hypothesis, that the mug shots would frequently be perceived by readers as being positive or negative in tone, appears to be supported.

TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

The second hypothesis stated that mug shots will be selected which match the roles of their subjects in the stories they accompany. One way to investigate this is to look for correlations between the ways readers ranked the stories and the way they ranked the pictures. This was done in two ways.

The first was to list the stories in rank order, from most positive (or highest index score) to most negative (lowest index score) and to compute Spearman's Rho for ranked data. This test is designed to determine the extent to which two rankings of the same cases are similar and produces a correlation coefficient similar to the Pearson product-moment coefficent. Perfect agreement in such a coefficient would be +1.0 and perfect disagreement -1.0. Rho in this case was +0.58, which suggests a fairly high level of agreement, significant at the .001 level.

Pearson correlations were also computed using the index scores for each story and picture to test how strong scores were with respect to the strength of reader impressions. Correlation between the two groups of scores was +0.597, again suggesting fairly strong agreement among readers, significant at less than .001. Table 3 presents a comparison of rank order and index scores and correlation coefficients for both stories and pictures which appears to support the second hypothesis: editors do appear to be trying to match what they expect the reaction of readers to be to a story -- or their own reactions-- with photographs which create a similar

impression.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

DISCUSSION

Nowhere is the old photo editor's dictum, "When cropping pictures, keep cropping elements until there's nothing left to remove," more true than with mug shots. Because such pictures are bereft of all distracting elements, the reader is forced to focus on the cast of the subject's eyes, the tilt of his mouth, or the furrows of his brow. No other sort of photograph invites the reader to judge the person in the picture so completely, without reference to what the subject is doing: just what he or she is like.

Newspapers are protective of their reputations for balance and fairness. If true objectivity is not an attainable goal, it is at least the object of the quest in American journalism, and reporters and editors are on guard against the sorts of subtle biases that can creep into the work of even experienced writers. Readers will always judge the subjects of the news stories they read, but reporters and editors try not to.

This study suggests, however, that editors, intentionally or not, may be reinforcing their judgments of story subjects with photographs which reflect their perceptions. The fact that those perceptions seemed in this research to be largely shared by their readers does not lessen the potential for subtle slants to be imparted to news-photo packages; reporters may write

scrupulously fair accounts of complicated and controversial issues, and that care can be quickly undone by an editor's thoughtless picture selection.

It should be possible to extend this line of research to seek out other such unintended slants in mug shot selection, perhaps based on racial, gender, social or other factors. A good base already exists for such work. Singletary[10] found that the percentage of page-1, white-only photographs had declined from the 94.9 per cent noted in 1936 but still stood at 80.1 per cent in 1976. Male-only photos had declined from 69.1 per cent in 1936 to 58.1 per cent in 1976. In a study of the final editions of 16 major dailies, Trayes and Cook[11] reported similar, though slightly higher figures. Miller[12] examined the number and the context of women and men pictured in the Washington Post and found women underrepresented and portrayed as less powerful than men. Replication of such studies with the added dimension of the photos' positive or negative impressions on readers could be an important addition to our understanding of how photographs are used.

Earlier studies focused largely on display photos, however, and did not consider the more subtle messages which might be present in the ubiquitous and innocuous mugshot. Results of this study suggest that a fertile area for inquiry might be to go beyond counting general categories of photo subjects and examine the ways in which picture selection and cropping helps to influence the ways readers react to them.

SUMMARY

Readers of approximately two dozen news stories agreed significantly on their impressions of the subjects of those stories, as did another group of readers who viewed only the mugshot photographs which had run with the stories. Readers do not appear to see mugshots as neccessarily neutral, but make judgments about the people so pictured.

These judgments correlated significantly with the judgments other readers made about the same subjects based on the stories which had run with the photos. This suggests that editors may have based their selection of accompanying photos on their subjective impressions of the subjects of the stories.

Numerous photographs are usually available of the subjects of news stories, particularly local stories. Results suggest that editors must exercise caution in choosing mugshots if they are not to stumble in the pursuit of fairness.

TABLE 1: Favorable Impression and Chi Square Scores for Stories

	STORY	FAV	NEU	UNFAV	χ^2	INDEX
1.	High school quarterback	57	8	1	84.64*	.848
2.	Pro quarterback wins job	45	18	2	43.59*	.662
3.	Ex-nun appointed to bench	40	17	3	34.90*	.617
4.	Novelist gets record advance	36	25	0	67.81*	.590
5.	Pianist debuts at Carnegie Hall	37	20	6	22.95*	.492
6.	New music company president	35	26	5	21.55*	.455
7.	Mayor faces election challenge	33	26	6	18.12*	.415
8.	New baseball general manager	29	30	7	15.91*	.333
9.	Suspended cop returns to duty	36	11	16	16.67*	.317
10.	Football GM puzzled by team	18	36	1	33.42*	.309
11.	City councilman loses election	26	32	8	14.18*	.273
12.	Education Secretary stresses basics	21	38	6	23.66*	.231
13.	Corp. owner protected from takeover	15	28	10	9.77*	.094
14.	Tunisian president regrets deaths	9	46	10	41.01*	-.015
15.	Black leader gets donation	14	33	17	9.78*	-.047
16.	Justice Dept. aide rejected by Senate	23	15	27	3.19	-.062
17.	Pro football coach fired	8	34	23	15.71*	-.231
18.	S. African president rejects pleas	8	20	38	20.03*	-.455
19.	Libertarian candidate battles govt.	5	15	39	31.05*	-.576
20.	Suburban mayor sued by city	7	10	49	49.91*	-.636
21.	Man convicted of killing wife	6	5	54	72.39*	-.754
22.	Murder suspect's trial near end	2	9	46	58.84*	-.772
23.	Ex-CIA man eludes FBI	5	4	54	77.81*	-.778

*p<.001 with 2 df

TABLE 2: Favorable Impression and Chi Square Scores for Pictures

	PICTURE	FAV	NEU	UNFAV	χ^2	INDEX
1.	Football GM puzzled by team	49	1	1	90.39*	.941
2.	Novelist gets record advance	39	10	2	44.59*	.725
3.	New music company president	37	12	2	38.24*	.686
4.	High school quarterback	35	13	3	31.53*	.627
5.	City councilman loses election	35	10	6	29.06*	.569
6.	Suspended cop returns to duty	33	13	5	24.47*	.549
7.	Pianist debuts at Carnegie Hall	34	9	8	25.53*	.431
8.	Tunisian president regrets deaths	24	14	13	4.35	.216
9.	S. African president rejects pleas	17	27	7	11.76*	.196
10.	Ex-nun appointed to bench	20	18	13	1.53	.137
11.	Education Secretary stresses basics	15	24	12	4.59	.059
12.	Ex-CIA man eludes FBI	11	31	9	17.41*	.039
13.	Corp. owner protected from takeover	9	33	9	19.06*	.000
14.	Pro quarterback wins job	12	27	12	8.82**	.000
15.	Black leader gets donation	17	17	17	0.00	.000
16.	Mayor faces election challenge	4	31	16	21.53*	-.221
17.	Libertarian candidate battles govt.	5	29	17	25.41*	-.235
18.	Suburban mayor sued by city	5	25	21	13.18*	-.314
19.	Pro football coach fired	0	28	23	26.24*	-.451
20.	New baseball general manager	0	25	26	25.52*	-.510
21.	Man convicted of killing wife	2	13	36	35.41*	-.667
22.	Murder suspect's trial near end	2	10	38	42.06*	-.706
23.	Justice Dept. aide rejected by Senate	0	11	40	75.65*	-.784

*p<.001 with 2 df
**p<.05 with 2 df

TABLE 3: Story and Picture Rankings and Indexes Compared

SUBJECT	STORY RANK	STORY INDEX	PICTURE RANK	PICTURE INDEX
High school quarterback	1	.848	4	.627
Pro quarterback wins job	2	.662	13	.000
Ex-nun appointed to bench	3	.617	10	.137
Novelist gets record advance	4	.590	2	.725
Pianist debuts at Carnegie Hall	5	.492	7	.431
New music company president	6	.455	3	.686
Mayor faces election challenge	7	.415	16	-.221
New baseball general manager	8	.333	20	-.510
Suspended cop returns to duty	9	.317	6	.549
Football GM puzzled by team	10	.309	1	.941
City councilman loses election	11	.273	5	.569
Education Secretary stresses basics	12	.231	11	.059
Corp. owner protected from takeover	13	.094	13	.000
Tunisian president regrets deaths	14	-.015	8	.216
Black leader gets donation	15	-.047	13	.000
Justice aide rejected by Senate	16	-.062	23	-.784
Pro football coach fired	17	-.231	19	-.451
S. African president rejects pleas	18	-.455	9	.196
Libertarian candidate battles govt.	19	-.578	17	-.235
Suburban mayor sued by city	20	-.636	18	-.314
Man convicted of killing wife	21	-.754	21	-.667
Murder suspect's trial near end	22	-.772	22	-.706
Ex-CIA man eludes FBI	23	-.778	12	.039

Rho = 0.5895455*
r = 0.5971079* with 21 df

*p<.001

NOTES

1 Michael W. Singletary, "Newspaper Photographs: A Content Analysis, 1936-1976." Journalism Quarterly 55:585-589 (1978).

2 Ibid., p. 586.

3 G. Norman Van Tubergen and David Mahsman, "Unflattering Photos: How People Respond." Journalism Quarterly 51:317-320 (1974).

4 R. C. Adams, Gary A. Copeland, Marjorie J. Fish, and Melissa Hughes, "The Effect of Framing on Selection of Photographs of Men and Women." Journalism Quarterly 57:463-467 (1980).

5 Michael W. Singletary and Chris Lamb, "News Values in Award-Winning Photos." Journalism Quarterly 61:104-108 (1984).

6 Beverly M. Bethune, "Pulitzer Procedural Changes and the Photography Prizes." Mass Comm Review 7(3):17-22 (1980).

7 Erving Goffman, Gender Advertisements. New York: Harper Colophone Book, 1976, pp. 13ff.

8 Timothy J. Curry and Alfred C. Clarke, Introducing Visual Sociology. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1978, p. 31.

9 The papers were selected because of their ease of availability and statewide influence in Ohio. They were the Cleveland Plain Dealer, Columbus Citizen Journal, Cincinnati Enquirer, Dayton Journal Herald, New York Times, Chicago Tribune and USA Today.

10 Singletary, p. 586.

11 Edward J. Trayes and Bruce L. Cook, "Picture Emphasis in Final Editions of 16 Dailies." Journalism Quarterly 54: 595-598 (1977).

12 Susan H. Miller, "The Content of News Photos: Women's and Men's Roles." Journalism Quarterly 52:70-75 (1975).